

Geek Cities: How Smarter Use of Data and Evidence Improves Lives

Statistician and author Edwards Deming famously said, “In God we trust; all others bring data.”

Across the country, more and more cities are using data and evidence to get better results for those they serve. In New York City, the mayor’s Center for Economic Opportunity has used evidence from program evaluations to discontinue seven city programs because of poor performance, and increase support for others that have been shown to work. Miami-Dade County school administrators, principals, teachers, and students regularly engage in “data chats” to discuss individual and school-level progress and set strategies for improvement—helping to transform the school system into an example for other urban districts. In San Antonio, city leaders persuaded voters to approve \$28 million in new sales taxes for pre-kindergarten programs with the promise that evidence will determine the choice of program models and that data will be used to track performance and de-fund any programs that aren’t achieving good results. And in Baltimore, the city’s budgeting process has been reshaped to focus on outcomes that matter and programs that work.

This “data revolution” in local government can’t come soon enough. Facing rising demand for services at a time of shrinking budgets, government needs to demonstrate it can do more with less. To address the needs of young people, their families, and communities in this context of constrained resources and mounting demands, decision makers must spend taxpayer dollars more wisely. And leaders must be willing to buck political pressure to preserve the status quo and invest wisely using data and evidence on what works. In this paper, we look at how innovative city leaders are doing just that.

To explore this promising trend, [Results for America](#), an initiative of the nonprofit [America Achieves](#), commissioned The Bridgespan Group to interview city leaders and urban experts. We interviewed more than 45 people to uncover trends in the

Important terms used in this paper

- **Data:** Measurements or statistics that quantify an output or outcome
- **Evidence:** Research studies and evaluations that collect data in the context of a systematic and rigorous experimental design and draw conclusions regarding program effectiveness
- **Performance management:** The systematic collection of data regarding program performance, which may include data on beneficiaries, outputs, outcomes, staff, costs, revenues, or other metrics relevant to the operation of a program or service.

See the [Appendix](#) for a complete glossary of terms used in this paper.

way cities are using data and evidence to do more for their residents. This report reveals what we learned.²

From dozens of significant innovations underway that make revolutionary use of data and evidence, we chose initiatives in six US cities to feature here. Baltimore, Denver, Miami, New York, Providence, and San Antonio all offer examples worth emulating. We also feature one initiative from London. While these are hardly the only examples of innovative use of data and evidence in the cities we studied, these examples illustrate the major trends we saw in how leaders are embedding the use of data and evidence into practice.

Investing in “what works”

The movement toward using data and evidence to improve federal and state government has gained momentum in recent years, with champions on both sides of the aisle.

Federal progress

President George W. Bush and his Office of Management and Budget prioritized improving performance of federal programs and encouraged more rigorous evaluations to assess effectiveness. The Obama Administration built on this effort by creating more explicit guidelines for agencies to include evidence and evaluation in their budget proposals.¹ Several federal departments have created competitive grants for which evidence of impact, or commitment to building evidence, is the main criterion. One example of this is the Social Innovation Fund, which is a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service. In Congress, leaders on both sides of the aisle—especially Senators Landrieu, Portman, Harkin, Wyden, and Stabenow—are starting to require evidence in spending decisions.

State progress

In Washington State, legislators and executive agencies have begun to use a cutting-edge research model that identifies evidence-based policies that provide the best return on taxpayer dollars. Results First, an initiative of the Pew Center on the States and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, is helping other states implement Washington’s model for use in criminal justice and, over time, in other policy areas. Other states, including Minnesota, Colorado, South Carolina, Ohio, Connecticut, Illinois, and New York, are working to develop pay-for-success contracts designed to incentivize providers to achieve better outcomes by tying funding to results.

1 Jeffrey D. Zients, “Use of Evidence and Evaluation in the 2014 Budget,” Office of Management and Budget, May 18, 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/memoranda/2012/m-12-14.pdf>.

2 This research was commissioned by Results for America, an initiative of the nonprofit, America Achieves. Results for America seeks to improve outcomes for young people and their families by helping ensure taxpayer dollars are invested strategically with a rigorous focus on data, evidence and better results, and discouraging continued support of programs that consistently fail to achieve measurable outcomes.

While urban innovation is happening across a wide spectrum of city services, we focus on education, jobs, youth development, and preventing infant mortality—all areas in which data and evidence are being used not simply to increase efficiency but to help transform people’s lives.

Our hope is that these examples and the accompanying recommendations inspire and enlighten city leaders as they strive to better serve their residents.

Cities help shape the futures of children and families

All levels of government—federal, state, and local—play a role in providing people with basic services, protecting their safety, and supporting access to opportunity. The federal government has the most resources, the strongest voice, and a unique vantage point. Its policies and funding decisions can create ripple effects, fostering change at other levels of government. States, too, have considerable resources and power to tailor solutions to the needs and interests of their residents. States have long served as “laboratories of democracy” through their program and policy innovations.

While federal and state governments do, indeed, influence the lives of their citizens, they do so at a distance. Meanwhile, closest to people’s everyday concerns, cities and counties manage many of the day-to-day services on which we depend, and arguably can focus most directly on what it takes to transform lives. Municipal governments have a huge impact on education, housing, economic development, public health and safety, transportation, emergency services, and more. Collectively, US municipal governments are directly responsible for spending about \$1.6 trillion every year.³

Today more than ever, economic and political forces are inspiring local action. As Jeffrey Katz and Phillip Bradley write in their book, *The Metropolitan Revolution*, “In the face of federal gridlock, economic stagnation, and fiscal turmoil, power in the United States is shifting away from Washington and toward our major cities and metropolitan areas. Across the nation, these communities, and their resolutely pragmatic leaders, are taking on the big issues that Washington won’t. They are reshaping our economy and fixing our broken political system.”⁴

3 Jeffrey L. Barnett and Phillip M. Vidal, State and Local Government Finances Summary: 2011, (Washington, DC: US Census Bureau, 2013), http://www2.census.gov/govs/local/summary_report.pdf.

4 Bruce Katz and Jennifer Bradley, *The Metropolitan Revolution: How Cities and Metros are Fixing Our Broken Politics and Fragile Economy*, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013).

Four exciting trends in local innovation

While cities may be responding to problems at the federal level, they are also being led by positive examples. For starters, the “what works” agenda⁵ at the national and state levels is stimulating local change. As detailed in the sidebar, “Investing in ‘what works’” on page 13, government leaders are increasing their efforts to find and fund what works. Philanthropy is playing a major part as well, with more foundations requiring outcomes and supporting efforts to develop, demonstrate, and scale programs with proven results.

Cities are also using technology to collect, understand, and act on data. This takes a range of forms, including more powerful computers, mobile apps to help residents request assistance with problems like filling a pothole, better methods for monitoring service delivery, and, of chief relevance to this discussion, new ways to use data to get a handle on what works and what doesn’t.

All of these influences are giving rise to a set of trends at the city level. We identified four significant ways cities are using data and evidence to embrace what works and take advantage of opportunities provided by new technology:

1. **Measure what matters:** Miami, Denver, and New York showcase how data can be used to improve outcomes for kids and schools.
2. **Build the evidence base:** New York and London demonstrate how cities can pilot, evaluate, and expand interventions that work—and discontinue those that don’t.
3. **Invest in what works:** San Antonio, Providence, and Baltimore illustrate the value of being a “fast follower,” adopting interventions proven effective elsewhere to efficiently address local needs.
4. **Budget for what works:** Baltimore highlights how one city redesigned its budget process to focus on the most important outcomes and fund programs that get results.

Let’s take a closer look at exactly how cities are pursuing these activities.

5 Proponents of the “what works” agenda seek to deepen investments in effective programs and practices that demonstrate results. Practically speaking, this means supporting efforts that show evidence of impact, as well as those committed to building an evidence base against which their impact can be assessed.